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ABSTRACT

This report is part of a multi-year project conducted by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and Boston University components of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. The report draws on results of a series of focus groups and interviews conducted in 1994 and 1995 to explore how policymakers and parents, teachers, and students in local schools view school reform and family-community collaboration. Policymakers view school reform as necessary to maintain a competitive economic advantage and think parental involvement is crucial to reform efforts, but some are skeptical about parents' desire to be involved in their children's education. Policymakers from both the Democratic and Republican political parties are interested in and supportive of family-community-school partnerships. Parents express a sense of urgency about the need for fundamental changes primarily because of a perceived lack of student motivation and values. They are also concerned about offerings for non-college-bound students, enrichment opportunities, uncaring teachers, and high school structure. Practitioners are concerned about students' stress level and lack of motivation, scarce resources, and changes imposed by out-of-touch bureaucracies. Teachers hesitate to recommend major reform because of previous failed programs, but many see strong parental advocacy as a key to changing conditions. Students are concerned about boring classes but their major priorities are safety, the need for engaging school and extracurricular activities, and teachers' lack of respect for them. By examining the views of the four groups, an understanding of what must change in U.S. schools can be achieved. The practice of community partnership for school change must become a matter of both regular practice and policy. The report concludes with descriptions of promising new approaches to school reform, including IRE's Responsive Schools Project. (KDFB)

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"Seeing" the School Reform Elephant

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From Littleton, Colorado, to Connecticut, to Kentucky, local and state school reform efforts have suffered serious setbacks in the last several years. Parents and even teachers in many communities are thwarting the best efforts of policy makers to bring about change. And yet nearly everyone agrees that we need "school reform." What happened to our national bipartisan "consensus" on new goals for education? Are different approaches — and new policies — needed to rejuvenate reform efforts?

The old Indian folk tale about the blindfolded men attempting to describe the elephant is a useful metaphor for understanding the school reform debate in America today. Policy makers, parents, and practitioners each describe a different part of the school "problem" and are advocating solutions based on what they "see." Each group holds a part of the truth; few see the whole. Students, who have a very important perspective to offer, are not heard from at all. Still more seriously, there is a tendency for each group to scapegoat others.

In its work over the last five years, the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning has studied various ways to create wider roles for families and community members in schools. In this paper, we argue that broadening the decision making process in school reform efforts to include these new partners is critical to the success of any such effort.

BY TONY WAGNER, PRESIDENT, INSTITUTE FOR RESPONSIVE EDUCATION AND PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR, CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND NANCY SCONYERS, SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, CENTER ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS AND CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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Together with colleagues, we recently conducted interviews and focus group discussions first with Capitol Hill staff who have influential roles in decision making, and then with parents, practitioners, and older students from twenty-one schools in eight communities around the country. The student populations of the schools represent a cross-section including inner-city, suburban, and rural communities. In each group, we asked a series of questions about the role of parents in a child's academic success, the goals of educational change, and what parents and community members can contribute to the process of change. An analysis of the answers that we heard reveals very different "starting points" for school reform among the four groups.

WHAT SOME POLICY MAKERS "SEE": A DEFICIENT LABOR FORCE AND PARENTS WHO DON'T CARE

Between April and December, 1994 we conducted interviews and focus groups in Washington with Congressional staff members from both sides of the aisle who work on policy and budget committees with responsibility for education. While they disagreed with one another on some issues such as the role of the federal government in setting national standards and insuring compliance with federal regulations, partisanship had not yet reached the fever pitch it did in the spring and summer of 1995. Answers to the question: "Should school reform be a national priority and if so, why?" were brief, but consistent:

"Yes, it should. We have to make sure that we can maintain our economic dominance. We need graduates with higher skills."

"School reform must be a priority in order for our country to remain competitive."

"We need a workforce for our information and high technology economy."

There seemed little to disagree on, so discussion of this question was short and unanimated, almost as if it were an obvious question for which everyone knew the right answer.

Similarly, these staffers quickly agreed that parental involvement is crucial for the success of school improvement efforts, saying things like, "Without parental and community involvement, no amount of money can make a difference" and "parents have to be intimately involved."

However, several Republican staff members expressed skepticism about whether parents want to be involved. Said one, "There may be some good ideas for encouraging more parental involvement, but they can only help if there is a change in attitude so that education becomes a priority for the family." "Parents have to want to do it. We shouldn't have to pull and tug," another agreed.

Several other staff members suggested that parents' attitudes and behaviors were a part of the school reform problem: "Kids used to come to school motivated to learn with respect for teachers...they don't anymore." "If you choose to take on the responsibility of having kids, then you have to have a long-term commitment."

Staff Democrats and Republicans also expressed differences on whether the federal government should promote specific strategies for increasing parental involvement, but they did agree on the need for better definition of what parental involvement actually means in schools. A number echoed the concern of many educators that parents will interpret "involvement" to mean that they are in total charge of their children's schools.

Staff also expressed interest in knowing what parents want for their children, whether they supported national goals and standards, and what successful school reform and parental involvement programs look like.

WHAT PARENTS "SEE:" MANY CHILDREN WITHOUT PURPOSE OR VALUES AND 'WAREHOUSE' SCHOOLS

In sharp contrast to the tone of the response by Hill staff to the need for education reform, parents' responses to this question were drawn-out, intense, and deeply-felt. They were united by a deep sense of urgency about the need for fundamental changes in their children's schools.

However, while a number of parents were concerned that their children were graduating unprepared for work, better "skills" and higher standards were not their main concerns. Issues related to students' lack of motivation and values were at the top of parents' list of reasons to undertake fundamental changes in schools:

"Schools aren't producing happy, healthy kids. They have no sense of purpose; they don't know where or how to go anywhere from high school."

"Kids say, 'Why should I go to school? There's no jobs.'"

"Before kids can be held accountable, they have to know what for. They have no sense of a future, no direction, no light at the end of the tunnel."

Many parents expressed the view that their children are unmotivated because most schools have nothing to offer less academically-inclined students. "We have an academic program for kids who have no intention of going on to college," said one. Another observed,"The education system lacks any kind of career development. Without it, kids will end up just working in McDonald's. One hundred years ago, all school had to do was produce literate people. Now they have to be prepared for careers."

A number of parents also raised concerns about the lack of "enrichment" opportunities for students such as computer labs, extra-curricular offerings, and after-school programs. "Kids have nothing to do after school. That's why they join gangs and get into trouble," observed one parent. Others agreed, suggesting that these kinds of opportunities were more motivating for many students than regular academic courses.

The belief of many parents that the structure of schools — especially high schools — is part of the problem came out in a number of comments: "Kids can't deal with big high schools. Too many are slipping through the cracks." "We can't prepare kids for the future in a lock-step setting." "They have to take on adult responsibility outside of school, but we treat them like kids when they come to school." One parent put the problem of schools' obsolescence even more strongly: "We have the same education system since we had the industrial revolution. All schools do is warehouse kids, not educate them!"

While some parents acknowledge that "parents who don't care" may be part of the problem of students who lack motivation, they are more inclined to believe that many parents do care but need some assistance to do a better job. "Parents need help and support to set stricter standards," suggested several. Others pointed out that many parents don't know how to get help and fault social service programs for being inaccessible. And all parents agreed that it must be everyone's responsibility to teach students values:

"Young people aren't prepared for work. They don't have work habits and self-discipline, they don't know right from wrong, and they don't have a sense of self-worth."

"Kids need help setting goals, building self-esteem, and learning to be responsible for their own actions."

"Kids need to be taught parenting skills."

"They lack social skills and self esteem. They need to learn how to negotiate, how to behave."

"For there to be more discipline in schools, there needs to be more community involvement. It's everyone's job."

Some parents believe that uncaring teachers are a large part of the problem, as well. To motivate students, a number suggested that you have to show that you care. "Adults need to be models," suggested several. Parents also expressed the view that schools must individualize learning. Several parents thought that special education programs show the way to tailor learning to each student's needs and interests, but that many teachers either aren't interested in this approach or don't know how.

WHAT PRACTITIONERS "SEE:" KIDS IN PAIN, FAILED PROGRAMS, AND AN OUT-OF-TOUCH CENTRAL OFFICE

Many teachers see the same kinds of behaviors in students that concern parents. One teacher lamented, "There are too many kids in pain today. It shouldn't hurt to have to be a kid." "Kids are different than when we went to high school," observed another. "They're not motivated now. To motivate kids, you have to know them...be their mother... and before I can get to academics, I have to teach them how to behave."

However, in general teachers were not inclined to say that major reforms were needed or to name any kinds of systemic changes in schools as the solution — especially those who work in large school systems. They've seen too many reform fads, like "new math" and "open classrooms," come and go, and so they're very skeptical of new ideas. "We need to reach out, build links, but not necessarily make fundamental changes," is how one teacher put it. "We need to think about goals and assessment before jumping into change," said another.

The problems most often mentioned by many teachers and school administrators in the largest districts where we interviewed originated outside their schools: scarce resources and changes imposed by out an out-of-touch bureaucracy and school committee. "We're on probation and may lose our accreditation because we have no librarian, no media center, and a counselor-student ratio of 937 to 1. Doesn't the central office know this? What are they doing about the problem?" said a Boston high school teacher. "The central administration and school board are

out of touch. They rarely come to the schools." "They've always tried to change schools from the top. It's never inclusive." "There are too many regulations." "Teachers are not involved in the education decisions." "We need more local control, so that we can design the focus of our own curriculum."

Some teachers in the urban systems expressed the view that strong advocacy by parents is a key to changing these conditions: "We need parents to put pressure on the school department — they can't get fired." "Last year, parental pressure resulted in the mayor saying that every kid would have a textbook."

Parents often supported this view, with comments like, "Poor schools only happen in low-income areas because they don't expect people to vote" and "there's a widening gap between education for poor versus rich kids." Parents, too, are skeptical of what happens "at the top" and believe there needs to be more local control. "The whole education process is too political now. The guidance of the system has to be in the hands of people who care about education and kids." While there are clearly similarities in outlook, parents were much more concerned with what was happening — or not happening — in their children's classrooms and schools and what might be done to make improvements.

WHAT STUDENTS "SEE" IS SELDOM HEARD

We also engaged older students in discussions about goals and priorities for change in their schools. Students' perspectives on their schools' strengths and weaknesses were often strikingly insightful, but the initial responses of some educators made clear that students' views related to school improvement are rarely solicited. Educators in our discussions had a more difficult time hearing the concerns of students than of parents.

Parents and students alike often complained of boring classes where teachers lecture, assign worksheets, or require students to read out-dated textbooks during class periods — and little more. The response of many educators to this complaint was initially dismissive and defensive as typified by one who said, "Kids are always complaining about being bored. They want us to be Big Bird and do a tap dance on our desk."

In one of the school districts contemplating a move to block scheduling, which would result in longer classes, students' concerns about boredom in school were especially deeply-felt: "I can barely stay awake for forty minutes. What am I going to do when they go to ninety-minute classes?" asked one. Others in the group nodded their heads in agreement.

Students' priorities for change in this same system were very different than those of educators. While teachers talked about double periods, the main concern of students was safety. They didn't feel comfortable walking in the halls of their high schools. Rules meant to discourage gang activity in the school were of no use, students argued. "They don't let you wear certain colors or hats or meet with more than so many people — it's crazy! As if that's going to stop gangs."

This student, an 11th grader, went on to describe a solution which sounded similar to the views of some parents, "Kids are gonna belong to gangs, no matter what. They got nothing else to do. What you gotta do is channel that energy. A couple of gangs started playing sports after school against each other in one school last year, and there was a lot less violence. Gangs have gotta have constructive ways of getting involved."

The need for more engaging activities in and after school was a recurring theme in discussions with many students. "Right now, school sports are only for the few kids who are really good. We need more options," argued one. Other students talked about wanting more hands-on learning activities in school. Learning more about computers was a strong interest of many.

But the most deeply-felt concerns of students had to do with what they felt was teachers' lack of respect for them. "They yell a lot more than they talk to you," said several. "If you're not one of their favorites, forget it."

In one of our school-site meetings, the simmering concerns of students about not being respected erupted suddenly when one teacher referred to kids in their school as "rejects." A tenth grade student replied, "I am strong and am going to make something of my life. Teachers have to believe in us!" The teacher who had made the initial comment apologized and hastily explained that she had been describing many students' perceptions of themselves in a school which few of them had chosen to attend. There were several strongly worded comments back and forth — critical but respectful — before the meeting finally went forward. For everyone present, it was a powerful object lesson in some of the difficulties that arise when groups try to work together for the first time. The experience also underscored the need for respect as the bedrock of collaboration and school change.

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"SEEING" THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES

One of the features which distinguishes the approach of IRE's Responsive Schools Project to site-based systemic reform is to sponsor focus group discussions and training programs with mixed groups of educators, parents, community members, and older students talking *together* about the need for and goals of change. In all five of the districts where we have launched our project, we observed that the strong concerns of many parents seemed to serve as a prod for educators to be more open to systemic changes within their schools.

As was mentioned earlier, in contrast to most parents who expressed deep concerns about aspects of their children's educational experiences, the majority of teachers and administrators in our five communities began our discussions with what might be called an incrementalist approach to change in their schools. Initially, the educators' focus was more on "what to do on Monday" — tactics rather than long-term goals. For example, a number of the high schools in our communities had recently switched to, or were considering implementing, block scheduling which would enable them to have longer class periods with some interdisciplinary studies and team teaching. However, in none of the communities had there been a prior discussion of the *problems* that block scheduling was intended to address.

Before the project began in our five communities, small changes were all educators felt they had either the "permission" or the resources to undertake, in most cases. However, educators seemed much more willing to consider more fundamental kinds of change after listening to the opinions of parents. They also began to take the concerns of students more seriously and to see advantages to including students' voices in the reform process. After two days of discussions and training in mixed teams, educators were still very concerned about where they would get the additional resources to plan change — mainly time for meetings — but they seemed much more open, even emboldened, as a result of hearing the parents' sense of urgency.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this project were primarily gathered through the use of focus groups. However, in some cases, it was important to learn the perspective of certain individuals who were unable to attend focus groups. In these cases, interviews were conducted.

Focus group methodology was chosen for this project for several reasons. The informal group setting of focus groups allows for a deeper exploration of attitudes and opinions related to reform. These can be explored in more detail through discussion than in the more structured survey approach. Also, we believed the interaction between participants would uncover attitudes that would lead the discussions into unexpectedly fruitful areas. This proved to be the case. Although focus group and interview findings are not quantifiable and do not produce results that are generalizable within a predictable margin of error, the richness of the material gathered can outweigh these advantages.

Interviews with Democratic staff members of both House and Senate education committees were done in Washington, DC, in the spring and summer of 1994. Interviews with teachers and administrators at elementary, middle, and high schools were held from late 1994 through 1995.

A focus group with Republican House staff was held shortly after the 1994 election. Focus groups were held with parents of children in kindergarten through high school, with high school students, and with education practitioners in groups of six to twelve people. The focus groups were held in the following locations:

Republican House Staff
Hart Senate Office Building
December 12, 1994
Flambeau, Wisconsin
December 14, 1994
Atenville, West Virginia
December 22, 1994
Las Cruces, New Mexico
January 12, 1995
Chicago, Illinois
January 18, 1995
San Francisco, California
practitioners attending American Educational Research Association annual convention,
April 6, 1995
Ipswich, Massachusetts
May 2, 1995
Newburyport, Massachusetts
May 10, 1995
Boston, Massachusetts
May 11, 1995
Boston, Massachusetts
December 6, 1995

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We wish to thank our colleagues at IRE and the Center on Families — Ameetha Palanki, Meredith Gavrin, Carol Strickland, Scott Thompson, and Abby Weiss — for their invaluable assistance with the focus group work. We also wish to acknowledge the excellent focus group and survey work of the Public Agenda Foundation — especially their landmark study, "First Things First: What Americans Want from Their Public Schools," by Jean Johnson and John Immerwahr — which has contributed to our understanding of the differences in perceptions between the "experts" and the public.

THE ELEPHANT "UNMASKED"

Hearing these divergent voices more distinctly in the school reform debate enables us to better understand why many schools aren't changing. While there are obviously some similarities, the dissimilarities between the groups are much more striking. Different groups mean very different things when they talk about school reform: Policy makers and business leaders talk about new skills and high standards; parents are concerned with their children's lack of hope and eroding values; teachers and principals want the central offices to go away and tend to focus on little fixes that are safe, known, and doable; students want schools to be more respectful and engaging places to be.

In a profound sense, what each group sees is true — but it is a partial truth. Only by bringing all the groups together can we have the fullest understanding of what must change in our nation's schools and why. But this goal has to be more than a matter of good intentions. The practice of community partnership for school change must become a matter of both regular practice and policy.

At the school level, there are some promising new approaches to bridging the gaps in perception and understanding that undermine many well-intended school reform efforts. Some examples of promising new best practices include the High School, Family, and Community Partnership Project in Maryland, and elsewhere, led by Joyce Epstein, and the Responsive Schools Project now underway in seven school districts — the five mentioned at the beginning of this report plus Cleveland and Milwaukee.

In both projects, parents and students are an integral part of a comprehensive school improvement process. Rather than rush to a quick implementation of a "solution" to a problem that has not been well-defined, teams of parents, educators, and students first engage in an intensive self-study. Using focus groups, interviews, and other action research techniques, they gather data to better understand the concerns of diverse groups — parents, community members, employers, students, recent graduates, drop-outs, teachers. With such data, school improvement teams are in a much stronger position to develop long-term sustainable implementation plans with clear goals, immediate priorities and promising strategies.

Launching these projects successfully has required intensive training and skillful on-site facilitation. The new skills and resources needed for this more collaborative approach to school reform raises fundamental policy issues about the role of districts, states, and the federal government in supporting such initiatives. An important question for further study is this: "What policies must local districts, states, and the federal government consider to support more inclusive — and therefore more successful — approaches to school reform?"

Note from Don Davies, Co-Director Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning

This report is part of a multi-year policy project conducted by the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) and Boston University components of the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning. Tony Wagner is the president of IRE and a principal investigator for the Center. Nancy Sconyers is the senior policy analyst for the Center. For this report, they draw on results of a series of focus groups and interviews conducted in 1994 and 1995 to explore how policy makers and parents, teachers, and students in local schools view school reform and family-community collaboration.

Several focus groups were held in the public schools of urban, suburban, and rural communities. Five of these — Las Cruces, New Mexico; Atenville, West Virginia; the school district of Flambeau, Wisconsin; Boston; and Chicago — are taking part in IRE's new school reform project, the Responsive Schools Project. Other focus groups and interviews were held in Washington, DC with both Democratic and Republican congressional staff members. The dates and places of all interviews and focus groups are given on page 5 of this report.

There are many important messages for both policy makers and practitioners in the commentary and analysis of the discussions with these diverse constituencies. The results show that national policy makers of both political parties are interested in and supportive of family-community-school partnerships. The most striking point in this report is the diverse and contrasting perspectives of the various groups: policy makers compared to practitioners; parents compared to teachers; and students compared to both parents and teachers.

This publication is one of six in the Policy Portfolio, which also includes:

- **Partnerships for Student Success:** What we have learned about policies to increase student achievement through school partnerships with families and communities
- **What Parents Want**
- **Partners In Action**: A Resource Guide
- **Annotated Bibliography:** Research from the Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning
- **A Tale of Two Partnerships:** Video

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